

CHAPTER ONE

“THERE WAS A TIME I HATED HER,” AN'TELLARUS said.

Her voice was soft, the words almost affectionate. If Elluvian had ever been able to relax in the presence of An'Tellarus, that softness would have put him on edge. As it was, the edge upon which he found himself was like the peak of a mountain; he couldn't move an inch without falling. Words, in this case, were substitutes for movement. He therefore said nothing.

She had offered him both a chair and refreshments; he had declined, and was now grateful to have done so. He had come at her “invitation,” and accepting hospitality implied a length of meeting he wished to avoid. He could pretend ignorance of whom she spoke, as she hadn't mentioned a name. But he knew.

Were the words meant to shock him? To anger him? To invite a similar dislike? All of her words were traps, but they weren't persistent; only if he escaped her quarters—and the High Halls—intact, he could be certain he had evaded them.

Had she been one iota less powerful, he would have declined the invitation.

An'Tellarus was far more at home in her personal quarters than any visitor would be; she both sat and availed herself of the refreshments Elluvian had refused. "Your eyes are a lovely and unfortunate shade of blue," she said, above the rim of her glass. Hers were a blue-green. "Come. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead. No subtlety on my part would be required. Sit, Elluvian."

As if he were a dog. "I am under time constraints, as you well know."

Her smile, as she offered it, was genuine. That was the most difficult thing about An'Tellarus. "You are not nearly under the time constraints you will be. I almost regret the inconvenience it will cause you." Her smile deepened. "I give you my word that I intend no harm to you today. Will you not join me?"

He did not, could not, trust her. The fact that she was kin made it harder, not easier. That, and the fact that she knew of his past. But he understood that she intended to extend this meeting; turning on heel and leaving was tantamount to suicide.

"Elluvian. You have never learned the art of grace. We both know that you will remain in my quarters until I have finished; we both know that I will decide when we are done. Is that not so?"

"An'Tellarus," he replied, emphasizing her rank.

She frowned. "You will give me a headache. You were easily the most stubborn of your kin, most of whom are dead." She watched carefully.

He nodded.

"Do not wish that the rest would join their number." Her smile returned. "Very well. You will stand, and I will speak as if you were the least significant of servants."

He was called the Emperor's Dog, frequently to his face,



and as it was materially true, he shrugged. He had no pride to prick. It was both his signal characteristic and, in the eyes of his people, his greatest weakness. It had certainly been a point of contention between Elluvian and one of his only surviving relatives over the past few centuries. An'Tellarus's eyes, however, retained their green; if she desired to descend into a lecture over being properly Barrani, she would not give into it today. It was the only mercy he was to be granted, and, in keeping with An'Tellarus, it was small.

"I have called you here to ask a favor."

He could not prevent his jaw from clenching. He did, however, find flexibility in his legs; he sat. This was not the first time he had been asked a *favor*, but the color of her eyes didn't imply the cold rage of imminent death.

"I am to return to the West March in the very near future."

Which would be a relief to everyone in the High Halls who had any reason to either interact with An'Tellarus, or who was too new or foolish to avoid her.

"I expect that I will not be greeted with great hospitality—that has ever been the case."

"You have guards."

"Indeed. I do. I wish you to be among them."

"Just how little hospitality are you expecting?" His tone, unlike hers, was sharper. He didn't trust her, and the trek to the West March would eat months of mortal time. Were it not for his duty to the Emperor, and his duty to the Wolves, those months would be a triviality. The Lord of Wolves, however, had survived what Elluvian considered to be the last assassination attempt for the next several years; the office was, if woefully undermanned, stable. The newest of Elluvian's recruits had settled into the job he had been given, and he was quick, bright, and often otherwise invisible while standing in place.

Helmat both prized and trusted the young Severn Handred.



Rosen approved. Jaren had not yet returned from his last hunt, but Elluvian felt almost certain—or as certain as one could be with ever-changing mortals—that Jaren would approve. Mellianne was...herself. Suspicious, and wavering between protective interest, envy, and resentment.

The office could survive a few months of his absence.

“When do you plan to leave?”

“That will depend on you.”

He had an inkling of what was to follow.

“I wish you to bring Severn Handred with you.”

The request was both expected and surprising, the latter because of the timing. Severn was only barely of age in mortal parlance. He had—there could be no doubt—experience with Barrani, but until his induction into the Wolves, that experience had likely been singular. He had met a single Barrani man, had been taught to read and write, and had been tested for the magical abilities so prized by Elluvian’s kin. That Severn himself did not seem to understand those abilities seemed clear to both of the Barrani currently in this room.

“Severn Handred does not report to me. I am not his superior officer.”

“I am aware of that.”

“I cannot fulfill your request.”

“Oh? You serve the Emperor directly; the boy serves the Emperor. While mortals are difficult and their hierarchical convolutions often mystifying, the Emperor is not mortal. You will have, and carry, more weight with our Eternal Emperor than the boy—or his Wolflord. If you request it of your Emperor, he will grant the request.”

“It is clear to me that you have not met the Emperor,” Elluvian replied, wry rather than stiff. An’Tellarus was unusual for a Barrani Lord, but she made assumptions. “The first question he will ask—and I consider it perfectly reasonable—is why. If

I cannot answer that question, the request will be denied. The existence of that request will, however, pique his interest.”

The green in her eyes dimmed. “Come up with an excuse. You are surely capable of that.”

“Perhaps you wish to speak with him in person. It would be highly unusual for a Barrani Lord to visit a second time, but I am certain he would allow an appointment to be made.”

“Now you are beginning to annoy me.”

“An'Tellarus.”

“If you cannot gain permission from the Emperor, I am certain the Lord of Wolves would grant what you ask.”

“The Emperor is the better choice if you wish for success,” Elluvian told her, his expression and tone bland and neutral. “But if you wish it, you will have to offer an explanation for the request.”

The last of the green faded from her eyes. Elluvian wasn't afraid of this woman; there was no point. If she desired his death, he was dead. He waited, impassive now, impatience falling from him just as green from her.

“You are both tedious and unobservant. I thought better of you.”

“An'Tellarus. Perhaps you will point out the ways in which I have been unobservant today. Should I trouble you to catalog all of my incompetencies, Severn Handred will have passed of old age by the time the tally is complete.”

“Would he?”

His smile was practiced artifice; he adorned it with no words.

Her smile was, he was certain, genuine, there was so much edge in it. “Very well, child. Play your games if you must.”

“It is not I who plays games, An'Tellarus. I confound most of our kin because I do not. I am the Emperor's servant. His dog, if you are unkind. I obey his commands when they are given; I do not scheme to escape them. If you ask a question,

I will answer it truthfully where possible; if I cannot, I will not. What do you want with Severn?”

“As I told you before you descended into your particular brand of surliness—and I must assume you are capable of better, as the Emperor has not yet reduced you to ash—I once believed I hated her.”

He did not ask *who*. He waited.

She nodded as if in approval, although the color of her eyes didn't shift. “She had everything, you see. Everything I wanted at the time. She was heir. She was respected—feared, perhaps—and in the fashion of our kin, she was powerful. Her magical gifts manifested far earlier than mine. She was considered flawless.” She looked down at her hands as they rested in her lap.

“Ah, but that was not why I thought I hated her. Her power was of a particular type—and she was beloved of the green.”

Elluvian frowned.

“You have heard that, surely?”

“No.”

“What have you heard?”

“She made a foolish decision for reasons no one of our kin could understand; she almost brought ruin upon her line and she did not inherit it. In the end, she died.”

“Do you know how?”

“No; it was not relevant to me. And you, who might know for certain what happened to your sister, forbid all discussion of it. I am not certain I would have survived asking irrelevant questions. Many did not.”

She nodded. “We do not forget. It is perhaps the only thing I envy mortals: they do. Even if their lives are short, they burn so brightly—and memories are consumed by the swift passage of their time. It is not so, with us.” She lifted her chin, exposing the eyes her downcast expression ob-

scured. Her eyes were shaded purple. “No body has ever been found.”

He looked away, as most did when confronted with evidence of grief.

“You have perhaps seen the statue I left in the hall. The boy did not recognize her.”

“And you expected he would?”

“I had hope, yes.”

“An’Tellarus—her fall was centuries past. She has not, to my knowledge, been seen in our world for centuries in *any* calendar. The boy is mortal. Unless you believe she still lives, how could that even be possible?”

“Hope is bitter. It has always been bitter; it is a vulnerability we would do well to discard entirely.”

“Perhaps you could start now.”

The air crackled. “I see you are without even a smidgen of empathy.”

“An’Tellarus.”

“Very well. You are undoubtedly *busy*. I will allow you to return to your various labors. But I am leaving within the ten-day, and I expect both you and the boy to be present.” She rose, indicating by the shift in posture that Elluvian should do the same. “Your presence, however, is not required. If you are unable to attend me, I will guard the boy personally.”

Elluvian’s eyes were indigo when he rose. “You will not touch Severn Handred.”

“I will not kidnap him, if that is what you are implying or inferring from my words. If I am not to simply pluck a random mortal of my choosing off the streets—and yes, I understand how laws of exemption work—he is, by the reckoning of the mortals, an adult. Should he choose to accept my invitation, yours will be the criminal act should you choose to forcibly prevent him from accompanying me.”

Elluvian was silent, considering the woman who stood

before him. Grief, if it had not been illusory, had been vanquished—as it so often was—by anger.

“You surely do not think that you are the only avenue I might take to approach my goals? I wish permission from those to whom he owes service, but I am fully aware that service in the mortal world does not have the weight, legal or otherwise, that it does in ours. Should he choose, for his own reasons, to venture to the West March, you cannot prevent it. I will endeavor to keep him alive; dead, he is of little use to me.”

“Ten days?” he asked, the words low and grudging.

Her smile was ice and steel. “Ten days.”

A knock on Severn’s door was not a normal occurrence. He had neighbors, but they—like he—tended to keep to themselves. The woman to the left did so because she had fled here from family. He knew very little about the tenants to the right; they had two children, both capable of running, shouting, and shrieking as if noise and sound were not a danger.

Here, with doors that locked and walls and ceilings in decent repair, it wasn’t. The noises of the city beyond the walls were constant, consistent; theirs were simply competing sounds in an enclosed space. That had not been true of his childhood.

He adapted, as he always had, to different truths, new facts. He did arm himself before he chose to answer the door, but not in a fashion that would be obvious to the visitor. He calculated risk, always, but he was now a member of the Halls of Law, and his address was in the smaller pool of the Wolves’ official records. It was likely a missive from one of the Wolves—Elluvian, perhaps.

Severn was not yet in a position where he could afford a household mirror of his own. Had a mirror been a prerequisite for the job he now held, he would have given up



all but the scantest of food to purchase one. The Wolflord didn't deem it a necessity; he appeared to dislike mirrors, although much of his time in the office involved their use. The Wolves had no other way to reach him if they needed to pass on information except by foot and door.

He had settled into this small set of rooms; they weren't home, but no rooms would be, no matter how large or grand. And he knew, when he opened the door upon two Barrani men, one carrying a sealed scroll, that he would have to move again.

"An'Tellarus wishes to speak with you."

"When?"

"At your earliest convenience." The messenger's face was smooth and expressionless, as if the young man he addressed was not a mere mortal who lived in the Barrani equivalent of a poorly repaired closet.

"It can't be today," he said, standing in the door.

"She understands your time is both precious and encumbered. If you cannot speak with her personally, there will be no hint of reprisal. But she wishes you to read this before you make your decision." He handed Severn the scroll case. When Severn failed to take it, he said, "The enchantments are entirely privacy-related; the seal itself is enchanted, and it will not break for any but you."

Severn took the case.

"We are not to wait for an answer. If you wish to meet with An'Tellarus, she will venture into the High Market both this evening and tomorrow evening. She can be found at The Rose Café, and she will make reservations for two—or three—under her name." The man bowed. His bow was low enough, exact enough, it made Severn uncomfortable.

I am uncertain that Elluvian will pass my message—and my invitation—on to you. I will not tell you that he is untrustworthy; I am certain you do not require the warning.





I wish to extend an invitation—to you, although I will accept Elluvian's presence if you deem it necessary—to visit my homeland. I offer you the hospitality of Tellarus for the duration of your stay. I have my own reasons for extending such an unusual invitation, but I am aware that you must find, in the end, your own reasons for accepting.

I therefore offer answers to a question—if it is a question you have ever asked yourself.

Do you wish to know more about your family? Do you wish to know—or perhaps locate—the Barrani who took guardianship of you in your early years?

I offer you information about both—but I will not give you that information in the heart of a city governed in its entirety by either a Dragon or the High Halls.

I await your reply; if you do not reply, I shall assume you have grown past these questions and you have no interest in the answers to them.

*Yours,
Cediela, An'Tellarus*

Severn still had the clothing Elluvian had insisted on purchasing for his first visit to the High Halls. It was appropriate for his meeting with An'Tellarus, and he wore it. He understood that clothing made a statement without the need for actual words. He understood as well that shaving was necessary; that he be totally clean and well-groomed. He knew how to walk as if he owned the street—to walk as if he belonged there. He didn't strut; he didn't call attention to himself; he simply walked as if these streets and the buildings that they contained were his home.

He looked as if he lived here.

There was a trick to this. It required observation, but he'd observed the city and its many streets, had spent hours watching how people simply walked—or ran—through them. He



saw the people that were treated politely, the people that were treated with care, and the people that were treated with barely veiled contempt, and he matched patterns in each case: age, gender, race, at first, but within those categories, clothing, hairstyles, chosen colors. Some people were attended by private guards. In some cases he felt the guards a waste, in others, necessary; there were people who seemed desperate to belong, and they made choices that were as ostentatious as possible.

Desperation had never, ever been his friend; it did not—with far fewer immediate consequences—appear to be theirs, either.

He saw no Barrani on these streets, although this was one of the areas of Elantra where Barrani who were willing to mingle with the merely mortal might go and still retain some scrap of social dignity among their own kin. He saw no obvious carriage, saw no empty spaces in the streets in which a carriage, concealed by magic, might be parked.

But he saw The Rose Café, its broad glass windows tinted and constructed in such a way that the café's name was rose-hued, transparent glass behind which customers filled the many seats. It was past dinnertime, and the seats had not yet fully emptied, but even on the wrong side of the glass, Severn saw that An'Tellarus hadn't lied: she sat, alone, at a table meant for two. The tables around this small table had been cleared, and no customers occupied them.

He swallowed, forced his hands to uncurl, and entered.

“Do you know,” she said, her voice almost songlike, trapped as it was in the currents of mortal conversation that could not entirely fade into the background, “I was not certain you would arrive.” She looked past him, nodded, and then lifted a hand. “I hope you intend to join me.”

“I would be honored, An'Tellarus,” he replied, in Barrani.

“I hope you continue to hold that sentiment when we

are done speaking.” Her smile was gentle but marred by something that implied a grimmer emotion beneath its surface. Then again, she was Barrani—and not young, by the reckoning of her people. Certainly not by the reckoning of Severn’s. “I see you have not brought Elluvian with you.”

“The invitation was not mine to extend.” Severn offered her a low, perfect bow.

“You have such pretty manners,” An’Tellarus said. She did not add *for a mortal*, but it was, and would always be, implied. Even so, he smiled.

“My teacher would no doubt disagree—much after the fact. He was never entirely satisfied with my use of etiquette.”

“I am sure you have very little reason to practice it; it would be entirely out of place in most of mortal society.” There was a question in the words that theoretically contained none.

“My teacher said that manners are a tool, but when they are necessary, it is essential that those tools remain in my grasp.” She nodded, as if this had answered the question she hadn’t asked. She was, to his eye, everything that he had been warned to avoid.

But she had offered answers to a question that had haunted Severn for much of his childhood—if she had them. He’d considered this with care while he dressed; meeting her was a risk because he didn’t understand what she wanted.

People—mortal or no—wanted things. Some of those things would be of use to Severn; Lord Marlin wanted a Wolf, and Severn wanted the employment; their wants overlapped. He couldn’t see a way in which what a Barrani Lord of the High Court desired would be in his best interests. He couldn’t be entirely certain the information she offered was true.

He couldn’t be certain it was entirely false, either. From the moment he had traversed her apartment in the High Halls, he was aware that she knew more about his teacher



than Severn himself did, that she knew something about the lessons he had learned before his teacher had departed the fiefs in which he had remained hidden for decades.

His teacher had never answered questions, and Severn had learned—quickly—not to ask them. What he had wanted, in the fiefs, was survival. What his teacher had offered was exactly that. He would teach Severn how to survive. But his lessons hadn't been practical. Severn had learned to read, to write, and to speak Barrani. He had learned something of Barrani history, as seen by his teacher. The teacher who was quick to point out that history itself was confabulation, something that was tainted and weighted by those who wrote the reports of events.

Nor did he consider such reports to be lies. *Severn, we are each concerned with the detritus of our own lives. We each live within a story constructed of events we have chosen—or events that we have had no choice in, but that nonetheless affect us. What I might tell you of the history of my people is colored, always, by the events I have personally seen, or those that have affected my freedom and my own kin.*

Rare are those who come to history with an interest in the events that have no personal meaning. They do, however, exist. You might call them scholars. You might call them Arcanists. I will tell you now that should you be unfortunate enough to encounter an Arcanist, you must avoid speaking with them or interacting with them at all. Power of a particular kind is the focus of their lives; they have devoted the whole of those lives to amassing more power.

It had made some sense to Severn, in the cramped room in which his lessons were taught, the ragged books on shelves surrounding furniture in decent repair. He had considered stealing some of those old books—but in his limited experience, they were without value. Very, very few of the people he could easily reach could read. Those that could would find no value in these books, and if he went farther afield, possible customers might simply take them rather than trade in coin.



You think like a Barrani, but your thoughts are too obvious, his teacher had said, his eyes a green that implied deep amusement and a smidgen of approval. Severn had, of course, said nothing.

Why do you pay attention to me?

Perhaps because I miss the days in which I could purchase and keep humans. The green had shaded to blue. Severn was uncertain if his teacher lied but understood that this discussion was now over. Perhaps in the future he might return to it—but never bluntly.

An'Tellarus was nothing like his former teacher. She was both warmer and colder. It was warmth she offered now; he could see it in the color of her eyes. But surrounding that hint of green was a wall of blue.

Severn was accustomed to walls. In some fashion, they were far more comfortable.

“You are thinking of your former teacher.”

He nodded. She didn't ask, and hadn't demanded, that teacher's name. He would have given it to her because he was certain that the name itself had been yet another mask—a lie that was not quite lie but was very far from the truth. His master was not so foolish as to give a mortal child information that could harm him, or harm them both.

Because she had not asked, he said, “I have not seen him since I was roughly ten years of age.”

“Roughly?”

“It's common for orphans to have little knowledge of their actual date of birth.”

“Ah. Of course. Clumsy of me.”

He understood that clumsiness was artifice here, but regardless, as the balance of power was in her hands, this approach was more comfortable for him. It was...unusual to have Barrani care about his comfort at all, even those absent of malice.



Be cautious. When in the presence of Barrani, never lower your guard.

To his teacher, the natural arrogance of the Barrani made the entirety of the mortal world a pale, harmless place. Severn, however, was mortal. He understood the rough edges of power in the fiefs, and he could see the overlap between those and the struggles of the Barrani—only the stages and the props were different. He therefore had learned, early, never to lower his guard, period.

But he had also learned to manage appearances; to be less obvious when his thoughts strayed to considerations of theft, of personal survival. He could be pleasant; he could be threatening—but each of his responses came from a measured consideration of their utility in a given situation.

“Barrani are seldom orphaned in a like fashion—although perhaps you are aware of this. Birth and awakening are highly scripted, highly ceremonial; our young cannot wake without the intervention of the High Lord’s Consort. We know the date of our birth, and if for some reason we are uncertain,” and her tone implied that this was never the case, “those dates are recorded in the High Halls. It is not so, I am told, of mortal births; there is no ceremony and no interference required for a mortal infant to arrive, whole but small, into our world.

“You do not know where you were born?”

She asked the question casually, softly, but there was an edge hidden beneath the gentle velvet of her chosen words. He didn’t need to lie, but had he, he would have. “No. Mortal memory is not Immortal memory; the time of our infancy is long forgotten even when we have lived a simple handful of years.” He exhaled. “You said you have possible information about my parents.”

She smiled, but the smile was complicated; ice and fire together that might end in the destruction of both. “I did.”

“Do you still believe it to be true?”



“I believe it to be true more than yesterday, and more than the day before.”

“What do you ask of me in return?”

“I wish you to accompany me on a journey. I will be returning to the lands of my birth in less than two of your weeks, and I am desirous of company. Your company.”

“Why?”

“I find you interesting, of course. In my youth, I would have done all in my lesser power to possess you.” Her smile sharpened.

He understood her meaning, but the enslavement of his kind was in the distant past now, well beyond the reach of his span of years, or the lives of his parents or grandparents, whoever they had once been.

“Do my parents still live?” It was not the first time Severn had asked this question of a Barrani.

“That, I do not know. The lineage of mortals was never our concern. But what information I have I will give you.” She studied his neutral expression, her eyes shifting color, the green giving way to the blue that seemed the sole resident of Elluvian’s eyes. “I was told often in my childhood that I should not play games. Games are dangerous and their consequences not so easily separated between the act and either victory or defeat. What do you think?”

He stopped himself from shrugging as she observed him. “I am only a mortal, and I have not lived among the Barrani.”

“Indeed. But I would hear your answer.”

“I cannot see how that is true, unless the word *game* is defined very differently among your kin. To my eyes, and to my admittedly scant experience with Barrani, games are your entire way of life. It is the stakes over which those games are played, and the board upon which the pieces are set, that differ—not the intent.”

“Oh?”

“Victory or defeat.”

She exhaled and nodded. “One day I would very much like to meet this teacher of yours. At your age now, we would be close to our infancy, and such knowledge is not easily retained—and yet, you have done so. Very well. The information I wish to impart—about your birth—cannot be imparted here, where the High Halls watch and the High Lord has spies everywhere. It is close to our *Leofswuld*—perhaps a handful of your years from now—and we will all be commanded to return to the High Halls.” At Severn’s expression, An’Tellarus smiled. “*Leofswuld* is the word we use when there will be a changing of the guard. It is quite probable that soon, we will have a new High Lord.

“Until then, I do not wish to disturb our kin. I do not wish them to interfere with my life or my own plans. There are places in my homeland which are immune to the machinations of the High Lord and his court, and the information you seek rests at the very heart of the safest of those places. If you agree to accompany me, I will take you to where you might ask your questions and receive your answers.”

He was silent, considering the color of her eyes and the position of her hands; she was so still she might have been holding her breath. He had noted, on his first introduction to An’Tellarus, that she was never completely still.

“Where is your homeland?”

“In the West March of our kin.”

“When would you need my decision?” His voice was almost flat; he might have been sitting at his desk, considering the information Records contained before attempting to draw conclusions from possible patterns. Nothing in his expression gave An’Tellarus purchase.

He had learned, not from his master, but from other children, other mortals in the streets of the fief of Nightshade, that eagerness must be hidden and contained. The greater the desire, the less it must show.

“I leave within the ten-day, with or without you.” She watched him. When he nodded she frowned, but added no further words.